

## **AHEC AND BENCHMARK COLLABORATE ON THE WISH LIST AT THE LONDON DESIGN FESTIVAL**



The Wish List is a unique collaborative project between some of the world's best-known design names and up-and-coming designers, brought together by the American Hardwood Export Council (AHEC) and Benchmark Furniture to create a compelling installation that will be exhibited at the Victoria and Albert Museum during the 2014 London Design Festival (opening on 13th September and specially extended by the V&A to the 24th October 2014).

Terence Conran, co-founder of Benchmark, instigated the project when he wrote to his friends and asked, "What have you always wanted in your home, but have never been able to find?" Such an open brief guarantees an extraordinary spread of design and the challenge was to produce each project in a single material: American hardwood.

Conran's friends are, of course, some of the most renowned names in architecture and design. Paul Smith, Norman Foster, Amanda Levete, John Pawson, Alison Brooks, Zaha Hadid, Alex de Rijke, Allen Jones and Richard and Ab Rogers have all proposed a longed-for product. The Wish List has not only engaged the interest of these 10 design legends, each of whom commissioned something for their personal collection. It has also given an extraordinary opportunity to a talented group of emerging designers, who worked closely with their commissioners to develop the designs and constructed them with the help of Benchmark's master craftsmen, some with 40 years' experience to draw on. The results is ten beautiful objects in a variety of American hardwoods including red oak, white oak, walnut, hard maple, ash, tulipwood and cherry. The pieces show the amazing versatility that can be achieved with a single material.

"Benchmark is the powerhouse of craft, where many of the world's greatest designers come to push the boundaries of what is possible to do in wood," says Sean Sutcliffe, co-founder of Benchmark. "The diversity of the pieces in The Wish List – and making them in one intense week – tested all involved. We had great successes, a few tears, some tantrums, but I think



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everybody learned a lot about craftsmanship and making. This project is a terrific platform for learning, enriched by the interaction of so much design and making talent.”

Terence Conran himself commissioned a workspace in red oak and cherry from Sebastian Cox, who crafted a complex and ingenious cocooned desk with shelving units; Norie Matsumoto created the perfect set of tulipwood pencil sharpeners for Norman Foster; Win Assakul designed and made an extendable 3m long walnut serving dish for Amanda Leveté. Gwendolyn and Guillane Kerschbaumer, the sisters who form Studio Areti, designed a suite of interior architectural elements for John Pawson: a set of walnut shelves, a tapered white oak door, a set of walnut hooks and pegs and a walnut light switch, all for his new house. Felix de Pass designed simple but strikingly elegant cherry kitchen stools for architect Alison Brooks; Gareth Neal made two extraordinary sculptural vessels out of white oak for Zaha Hadid; Nathalie de Leval, who is also a cabinetmaker, designed and built a personalised garden shed for Paul Smith out of thermally modified ash; Rob Barnby and Lewis Day of Barnby & Day created a dramatic circular dining table for Alex de Rijke using engineered cross laminated tulipwood. Richard Rogers, together with his son Ab Rogers, requested a red oak ladder that they could sit and work on from Xenia Moseley; and Lola Lely interpreted a very unusual design concept for a reclining seat from artist Allen Jones constructed out of maple and walnut veneer.

For David Venables, European director of AHEC, this project is very much about the versatility of American hardwood and the ability to experiment with designs both big and small. “I can’t think of any other material that could be used to create such an eclectic mix of personal products and render each one beautiful and unique,” he says.

During the manufacturing process, the teams recorded all energy consumption and assessed the environmental impact of each object using data from AHEC’s Life-cycle environmental assessment (LCA) research. LCA is a scientific tool that helps manufacturers establish environmental frameworks that assess true sustainability. The results present the cradle-to-grave impact of each product across six categories. The most topical impact category is global warming potential (GWP), or carbon footprint.

“Working with AHEC on ‘Out of the Woods’ in 2012, Benchmark produced the world’s first wooden furniture with full LCAs,” says Sutcliffe. “Now we seek to build on that learning and develop tools that will enable designs to be rationalised on the basis of LCA data feedback. It is an exciting moment to be working within this fast-developing science.”

A consignment of American white oak, walnut, tulipwood and cherry was kindly donated by timber and panel products distributor James Latham for this project. Morgan Timber and AHEC member Northland Forest Products kindly donated thermally modified American ash for Paul Smith’s shed.

The American Hardwood Export Council and Benchmark’s ‘The Wish List’ will be on show at the V&A museum from the 13th September -24th October 2014.

Photography is available from:

[https://www.dropbox.com/sh/foypuqk21obxy4z/AAA8B3\\_sucFDDXeJWhnIZ4WXa?dl=0](https://www.dropbox.com/sh/foypuqk21obxy4z/AAA8B3_sucFDDXeJWhnIZ4WXa?dl=0)

Photography credit: Petr Krejčí



#### **GETTING AWAY FROM IT ALL**

Commissioned by Terence Conran

Designed with Sebastian Cox

Made from American red oak and American cherry

Sir Terence Conran asked designer Sebastian Cox to create a “cocoon-like desk” in red oak and cherry for his office – a place where he could work without distractions, with everything he needed to hand. “I like the idea of being cocooned away happily designing or writing in blissful peace,” he says. “And it will save me going in to the greenhouse in my garden, which is currently my favourite place for quiet time.” Why doesn’t the design titan simply do it himself? “While I’ve had the occasional piece customised,” says Conran, “I have never once had the opportunity to design something purely and selfishly for myself.”

Regarding Conran’s brief for a desk, Sebastian says, “It’s a space Terence can work in without distractions, a cocoon-like desk with cabinetry around it, a space for undistracted creative thought.” Yet building it from red oak, cherry and ash took more than a little creative thought, and considerable skill. The 2mm red oak strips Cox chose for the curved screens had to be soaked in a brook on the Benchmark property before they could become supple enough for weaving. Then Cox finished them with a whitener to lighten their appearance to Conran’s specifications.

For the cupboard roll-top, Cox joined solid pieces of wood mechanically, then built a drawer to conceal the mechanism. “This was the most advanced, intricate and challenging thing I had ever made,” says Cox, “but how often do you get the chance to design something for someone who is so important in the industry?” For his part, Conran says, “I have been making furniture for 60 years, but I am still learning from Sebastian.”

#### **Sir Terence Conran**

Terence Conran is one of the giants of British design, revolutionising our attitudes to furniture and food. He set up his own design business in 1956 and launched the first Habitat store in 1964 and later founded The Conran Shop. He set up Benchmark Furniture with Sean Sutcliffe in 1984.

#### **Sebastian Cox**

Sebastian Cox is a furniture designer and maker with a strong belief that sustainable design does not have to result in a boring or compromised product. His simple, elegant handmade pieces are recognised for their imaginative use of an underused resource – coppiced hazel.



#### **A STOOL FOR THE KITCHEN**

Commissioned by Alison Brooks  
Designed with Felix de Pass  
Made from American cherry

Alison Brooks wanted an object that she would not only own but also put into production. She commissioned a stool for her kitchen from Felix de Pass that could work in a range of environments. “The stool,” she says, “is always the most popular seat in the house. Stools offer a dynamic kind of seating. There’s a temporary quality to sitting on a stool – you don’t have to commit to sitting down. I’ve never been able to find a really clever, beautiful kitchen stool that is the right height for a kitchen counter.” She chose cherry wood, a timber she felt was under appreciated and which her mother collected when she was growing up in Canada. “Cherry has a tight grain with lots of character. The colour grows darker and richer over time to an incredible burnt umber colour,” she adds.

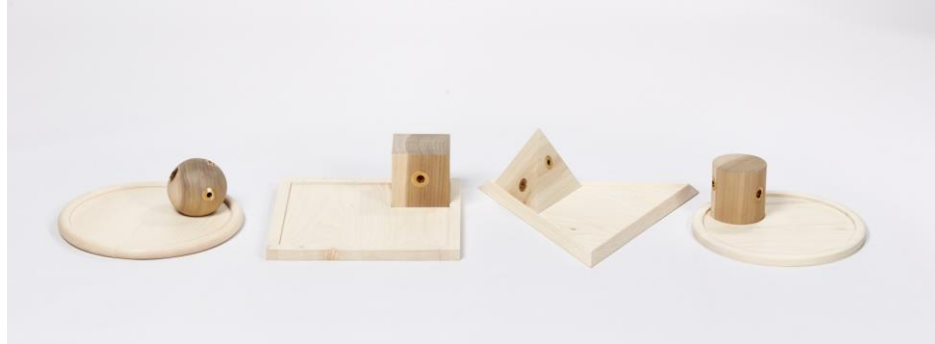
The stool consists of a cherry seat and post that de Pass steam-bent into three legs. With Benchmark’s help, he laboured over how to attach the stainless-steel footrest, or “crown”, settling, eventually, on three discreet metal bars. Brooks helped the designer refine the seat into a light disc that becomes sturdier where it joins the base.

#### **Alison Brooks**

Winner of the AJ Woman Architect of the Year Award, Alison Brooks founded her eponymous practice in 1996, focusing on residential architecture, social housing and academic buildings – like her residence for Exeter College, Oxford. The practice has won the Stephen Lawrence award, the Manser Medal and the Stirling Prize.

#### **Felix de Pass**

London-based designer Felix de Pass focuses on simple, functional furniture, lighting and interior design and explores cutting-edge technologies for his dynamic design process. He graduated from the Royal College of Art in 2009.



### **TULIPIFERA SHARPENERS**

Commissioned by Norman Foster

Designed with Norie Matsumoto

Made from American tulipwood

Norman Foster may run one of the most technologically advanced practices in the world in, but he still likes to draw. “For as long as I can remember the pencil and I have been inseparable companions – sketching and scribbling are integral to my way of life.” He described his wish as “a pencil sharpener for three sizes, capable of sitting on a desk and with a compartment to receive the shavings”. Foster has more than one desk, so the wish expanded into a family of pencil sharpeners, each for a different location.

Foster and Matsumoto chose to design the pencil sharpeners in American tulipwood, which is often seen as a low-quality timber, abundant and inexpensive. But Foster loved the variation in colour. “Of all the samples we examined,” he says, “it was uniquely pale and the grain had an almost marble-like quality.”

The cube, cylinder and sphere were cut from solid pieces of tulipwood, but the tetrahedron, at four inches, was wider than the thickest available stock. To compensate, Matsumoto cut triangular pieces from the wood and joined them together. “The angles and jointing were challenging. There were a lot of practical issues I had to solve.” she says. Each sharpener has a tray to sit on that is large enough to hold a sizeable collection of pencils.

### **Norman Foster**

Norman Foster is the founder and chairman of Foster + Partners. Since its inception in 1967, the practice has received over 680 awards and won more than 100 international and national competitions. Recent work includes Beijing Airport, the world’s largest single building; Millau Viaduct in France, the Swiss Re tower; and the Great Court at the British Museum. Foster became the 21st Pritzker Architecture Prize Laureate in 1999. In 1990 he was granted a Knighthood in the Queen’s Birthday Honours and in 1999 was honoured with a Life Peerage, becoming Lord Foster of Thames Bank.

### **Norie Matsumoto**

Norie Matsumoto is a Japanese product designer based in the UK. Her background is in furniture design and making, and she developed her industrial design skills when studying at the Royal College of Art. Matsumoto received a Conran Foundation Award in 2012 and set up her London design studio in 2013.



#### **VES-EL**

Commissioned by Zaha Hadid  
Designed with Gareth Neal  
Made from American white oak

Zaha Hadid's wish was very open-ended, simply specifying 'tableware'. Gareth Neal approached the project by thinking about the fluid nature of Hadid's work but juxtaposing that with a functional element dynamic. From this, the water carafe idea emerged. He was invited to go to Hadid's office and working with her design team, using the company's modelling software to create the vessel; there he conceived the idea of extruding the form along one of its axes with a slit opening at the end that allowed the viewer to look into "a cathedral-like space".

Benchmark had to upgrade its CNC software to achieve the complicated form. Neal constructed the vessels in two halves, which were expected to be identical but in fact were not quite, adding the sense of a "maker's mark". The process produced ridges that were analogous to those created by a potter's thumb. Neal and Hadid agreed to keep one vessel natural, while the other was ebonised. Sean Sutcliffe says of the results, "I have been running my workshop for 32 years, and this is the most remarkable thing we have ever made." Gareth Neal adds, "I hope the pieces will embed the design with a sense of the handmade through the arm of a robot, questioning the viewer's perceptions of craft and the handmade".

#### **Zaha Hadid**

Zaha Hadid was awarded the Pritzker Architecture Prize in 2004 and the Stirling Prize in both 2010 and 2011. She is renowned worldwide for her built, theoretical and academic work. Her projects are characterised by their geometric complexity and often by curved forms. In addition to buildings, she has designed furniture and shoes.

#### **Gareth Neal**

Gareth Neal approaches design through material inventiveness, curiosity and reinterpretation. Projects range from individual pieces for the international collectors' market to bespoke commissions for private clients and production pieces for industry.





### **THE HOLE CHAIR**

Commissioned by Allen Jones  
Designed with Lola Lely  
Made from American maple and walnut veneer

Jones' wish was for a recliner in the shape of a human form, a concept he developed more than 10 years ago but, he says, "I didn't have the facilities to pursue it." The idea was that it should have a personalised form, fitted to the contours of his own body, while also deliberately androgynous. A dowel inserted into the drainage hole would take its inspiration from the removable phallus on Marino Marini's statue of a horseman in front of the Peggy Guggenheim museum in Venice. The chair evolved from a recliner into a more upright chaise longue. Lely made a full-sized model at Benchmark, then drove it from the workshop to Jones's home at London's Barbican, so he could have it "fitted" in the truck outside, to the entertainment of passers-by.

Of The Wish List project, Lola Lely says, "I was the problem solver. It was all right not to be so much of a designer on this project. This is what Allen wanted and what he got." She constructed the chair from maple and walnut veneer. "The only way we could make the shape I wanted was in veneer," she says. The main timber, maple, is a uniform pale colour, and contrasts well with the dark tones of walnut. Lely built up the form with 13 layers of veneer, adding special top and bottom walnut layers with marquetry. "They went together like jigsaws," she says.

### **Allen Jones**

British artist Allen Jones studied at the Royal College of Art and is associated with the genesis of Pop Art. He is still best known for Chair, one of a series of "transgressive" sculptures he created in 1969, in which the seat is supported by a female mannequin dressed in black boots and underwear. He continues to work in sculpture and lithography, drawing much of his imagery from advertising and performance.

### **Lola Lely**

Lola Lely is a London-based designer who makes explicit connections between narrative, material and process. She has collaborated with various experts, including anthropologists, master painters, storytellers and silversmiths.



### **6 X 500**

Commissioned by Amanda Levette

Designed with Win Assakul

Made from: American walnut

Amanda Levette often entertains up to 18 people at the 4.8m-long dining table she designed for her home. She loved the idea of a long and reversible serving dish that would allow people to help themselves to cold meats or fruit. She also asked for a storage box that should be as beautiful as the dish itself.

Levette commissioned Win Assakul to design the pieces saying, "He is quite exceptional as a designer, thinker and communicator. It is rare to find those qualities in one so young." Levette and Assakul chose American walnut to give the dish a rich and luxurious quality. The idea was that the dish would be nearly flat on one side, for cold meats and cheeses, and with deeper hollows on the other side, for fruit. It is in six pieces: four interchangeable central sections, and two ends. Assakul hand-carved each section and used dovetail joints to join the pieces. Creating these was a delicate balancing act – they had to be tight enough to fit, but not so tight that a mallet would be needed to separate them. The contoured reversible walnut dish with brass edging is in six pieces. Every piece is subtly different because of the hand carving. "We had designed it with as little flat surface as possible on the underside, to reveal as much of the grain as we could," says Assakul.

### **Amanda Levette**

Amanda Levette is a Stirling Prize-winning architect and founder of AL\_A, an international design and architecture studio. Recent commissions include the highly anticipated expansion of the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, a new centre for the cancer-care charity Maggie's and a 13-hectare media campus for Sky. In 2011, Levette designed the Timber Wave, a complex structure in American red oak that stood outside the V&A during the London Design Festival.

### **Win Assakul**

Win Assakul recently completed his Part II from the AA School of Architecture and gained his architectural experience at AL\_A under the wing of Amanda Levette. "He was probably the best year-out student we have ever had," says Levette.





## ROOM

Commissioned by John Pawson  
Designed with Studio Areti  
Made from: American white oak and walnut

John Pawson commissioned a family of elements for the country house he is currently remodelling for his family. The site includes agricultural buildings dating back centuries. "Rather than starting with the idea of commissioning a specific piece of furniture, I was interested in getting Studio Areti to explore the things you touch and use every day, that are moments in the life of a place as well as objects – switching on a light, opening a door, hanging a shirt on a hook, taking a book down from a shelf," he said. Pawson had not worked with Studio Areti before but says, "I was interested in the breadth of training and experiences the two sisters bring to their design studio – from architecture and art history to product design."

The team chose white oak and walnut. "We're exploring the possibilities of their colour contrast and very different characters of grain," says Pawson. The most complex element the pair designed was the door. "When you have a door in a wall it is an interruption to a very pristine surface," says Gwendolyn. "We decided to design a door that is not ashamed, but that works with the wall in an elegant way." The solution was to taper it, so it always looks half open – though this made hanging it more challenging.

The dimmer switch demonstrates the sisters' attention to detail. When the light is off, the grain on the knob is aligned with that of the base plate.

### John Pawson

John Pawson established his own practice in 1981 after spending his formative years in Japan. His work spans a wide range of scales and typologies, from a bridge across a lake and a flagship store for Calvin Klein to yacht interiors and a Cistercian monastery in Bohemia. He is currently remodelling London's former Commonwealth Institute, scheduled to open in 2016 as a permanent home for the Design Museum.

### Atelier Areti

Sisters Gwendolyn and Guillane Kerschbaumer set up Atelier Areti in 2008 to focus on lighting, furniture and other design related to interior architecture. Gwendolyn has a bachelor in visual arts from Duke University and a Masters in architecture from Harvard. Guillane has a degree in art history from the Sorbonne and a bachelor in product design from Central Saint Martins.



#### **TABLE TURNED**

Commissioned by Alex de Rijke  
Designed with Barnby & Day  
Made from: American tulipwood

Alex de Rijke wanted a large circular laminated-tulipwood pedestal table that looks as if it has been carved from a single tree. "We know everything takes place at the table," he says. "The best decisions are made, meals are enjoyed, homework is done, computers are used." A round table is, he says, "more democratic. It means that children have as much say as adults." Having designed 'Endless Stair' in collaboration with AHEC in 2013, de Rijke wanted to work with tulipwood again because he liked the fact that it is strong, light, abundant and beautiful. "The liveliness of the grain varies because it has grown in different microclimates," he says.

The design was initiated by de Rijke and then developed collaboratively with Barnby & Day. Rob Barnby and Lewis Day built up the table from 13 rings of three-layered cross-laminated-timber (in CLT, the grain runs in opposing direction on each layer, making the panels stronger and more stable). The table was turned in three sections. "It was incredible to watch such a large object turned on the lathe," says Day. The largest section turned at a speed of 62mph on the outer edge, so it was essential that nothing went wrong. De Rijke spent a day at Benchmark while the top was turning, refining the profile of the edge. The end result weighs in at 170kg – more than was anticipated, but far less than the weight of the solid table it appears to be.

#### **Alex de Rijke**

Alex de Rijke is a founding director of dRMM Architects and dean of the School of Architecture at the Royal College of Art. dRMM's key projects include Clapham Manor primary school in London, which was shortlisted for the RIBA Stirling Prize in 2010, and Festival House, an award-winning chapel, tourist centre and café on the seafront in Blackpool.

#### **Barnby & Day**

Rob Barnby and Lewis Day handcraft furniture from their workshop outside Hay-on-Wye. Barnby developed his simple Scandinavian style at Nottingham Trent University in 2012. Day studied motorsport engineering has a background in making.



#### **THE LADDER THAT LIKES THE WALL**

Commissioned by Richard and Ab Rogers

Designed with Xenia Moseley

Made from American red oak

Richard and Ab Rogers wanted a ladder that would allow them to perch at a height and be comfortable enough for writing, eating and working. They also wanted it to be economical with materials. A ladder, says Ab Rogers, "is a simple diagram of how to get you off the ground." To be sturdy enough for all those tasks, it needed to invert the A shape of a traditional fruit-picking ladder. Total stability would be borrowed from the existing architecture of the surrounding environment, leaning on a vertical surface – a wall or a bookcase.

For The Wish List, Moseley saw herself as a facilitator. "At first I didn't see my stamp," she says, "but now it is very much a meeting of minds." She became involved with the steam-bending of the American red oak she chose for the ladder (red oak was chosen for its receptiveness to steam-bending). The uprights of the ladder had to be designed so they could provide handholds for people going up and sitting down. Moseley, along with the Rogers, resolved this elegantly, designing one upright with a tight outward curve at the top, and another extending beyond the tray, which can fold away. "It has been such a roller coaster and a whirlwind," says Moseley. "It's been more productive than I could ever have imagined."

#### **Richard and Ab Rogers**

Richard Rogers is an architect and founder of Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners. He is best-known for his iconic buildings, which include the Pompidou Centre in Paris, Lloyd's of London and Barajas Airport in Madrid. He was knighted in 1991 and made a life peer in 1996.

His son Ab founded Ab Rogers Design in 2004, now an established studio that plays with colour, materials and function into everyday products. He is also head of Interior Design at the Royal College of Art.

#### **Xenia Moseley**

A recent graduate of Design and Craft at Brighton University, Moseley studied interior architecture for a year. Her projects are rooted in social engagement, with outcomes ranging from a prize-winning card game to a Journeywoman's boat.



#### **PAUL'S SHED**

Commissioned by Paul Smith  
Designed with Nathalie de Leval  
Made from thermally modified American ash

Paul Smith's request was for a garden shed, "Somewhere you can go to switch off, somewhere to relax," he says. "In today's world where everyone is so busy, I think this is really important and very needed." He stipulated that one end of the shed should be glazed, offering a view out. And, like the shed George Bernard Shaw used to write, Smith wanted his to rotate, so he could take advantage of sun or shade at different times of day. Paul Smith chose to work with Nathalie de Leval, saying, "Nathalie's understanding of the materials she works with is really amazing. She combines this with fantastic craftsmanship to make something truly contemporary."

As Smith wanted the shed to be all wood, thermally modified hardwoods, with grade-one durability, seemed a sensible choice. De Leval chose thermally modified ash for its dimensional stability, rich colour and grain. She consulted with Arup's timber specialist, Andrew Lawrence, on the structure, which had to be demountable. "Paul's Shed is the first structural use of thermally modified American ash," says Lawrence. "The thermal modification makes the ash resistant to decay and imparts a wonderful dark tone, while at the same time preserving enough strength for modest structural use. The next step will be to do some formal strength testing." The thermally modified ash was kindly donated by Morgan Timber and Northland Forest Products.

De Leval spent two days making the base, which sits on a hand-rotating mechanism. Diagonal tensioning cables hold the shed in shape. "It is all incredibly low tech, which I like," says de Leval. "It's a flat pack. But it was a lot of work. I did seven issues of drawings."

#### **Paul Smith**

Paul Smith is a quintessentially English designer who has created a hugely successful business that is known around the world. The Paul Smith empire now spans, menswear, womenswear, accessories and items for the home.

#### **Nathalie de Leval**

Nathalie de Leval is an independent furniture designer and maker, focusing on bespoke commissions and products predominantly in wood. Originally a sculptor, she studied cabinet-making in order to improve her making skills, but the furniture quickly took over, taking her to an MA at the Royal College of Art.

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#### **ABOUT AHEC**

For over 20 years the American Hardwood Export Council (AHEC) has been at the forefront of wood promotion in Europe, successfully building a distinctive and creative brand for U.S. hardwoods. AHEC's support for creative design projects such as The Wish List for The London Design Festival, helps demonstrate the performance potential of these sustainable materials and provides valuable inspiration.

[www.americanhardwood.org](http://www.americanhardwood.org)  
[www.wishlistdf.info](http://www.wishlistdf.info) #wishlistLDF @ahec\_europe

#### **ABOUT BENCHMARK**

Benchmark is a leading company of craftspeople and designers, founded 30 years ago by Terence Conran and Sean Sutcliffe. Based in West Berkshire on a converted farm, the team is now 50 strong in over 40,000 sq ft of workshops for timber milling, carpentry, veneering, spraying, specialist metalworking and upholstery, as well as design studio and furniture showroom. Benchmark works extensively on design solutions for hotels, restaurants, public buildings, offices and private residences.

[www.benchmarkfurniture.com](http://www.benchmarkfurniture.com)

#### **ABOUT THE LONDON DESIGN FESTIVAL**

The London Design Festival is a key constituent of London's Autumn creative season, alongside London Fashion Week, Frieze Art Fair and the London Film Festival. Established in 2003 its role is to celebrate and promote London as the world's design capital and gateway to the -take out to the international design community and it has now established a reputation as one of the largest and most exciting design events in the world. This year the Festival will run from 13-21 September and over 300 events and installations will be on offer across the capital, from an exciting programme at the V&A to a major installation within Trafalgar Square plus over 250 partners who will participate in the week-long Festival.

[www.londondesignfestival.com](http://www.londondesignfestival.com)

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A book about the project, written by Ruth Slavid and designed by Nick Watts, will be available from 15th September 2014. The book can be ordered on [www.wishlistdf.info](http://www.wishlistdf.info) or [www.americanhardwood.org](http://www.americanhardwood.org)